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OUTDOORS BY JAMES JOHNSTON



Echo Basin Trail

Visit the oldest (and shaggiest) trees in Oregon.

PHOTO BY JAMES JOHNSTON

This is a hike for true dendrophiles, those folks who can appreciate really outstanding examples of a particular tree species. Even if you're not a tree geek, you'll be impressed by the forest in Echo Basin, which features trees as old or older than any in Oregon.

A lot of experts would have a hard time guessing what the oldest trees in Oregon are. They're not Douglas fir or redwoods. They're not the stunted junipers of Eastern Oregon or the gnarled Pacific yew. They're probably Alaska yellow cedar. The oldest yellow cedars in Echo Basin were seedlings more than 1,500 years ago.

It's a relatively long drive for a short hike, but it's a great trail for people of all ages and abilities, and there are lots of other attractions nearby, including Sahalie Falls, Iron Mountain and Cone Peak, all highly recommended hikes.

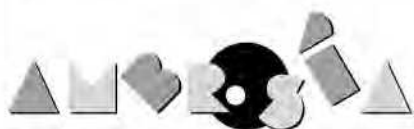
Directions: Drive Hwy. 126 east from Springfield. After 66 miles stay to the left onto Hwy. 20 heading west. After 4.8 miles on Hwy. 20, just past Lost Prairie Campground, take a right on the easy-to-miss FS 055 (37 miles east of Sweet Home). Drive 055 for 2.1 miles, and find the trailhead on your right.

The Echo Basin trail is a 2-mile loop that gains just 600 feet. You begin hiking up a mild grade through a tree plantation. After less than half a mile, you leave the fiber farm behind and enter a pleasant alpine forest. The trail fork to the right will be your return route. Staying to the left, the trees get bigger and more impressive the further up the valley you go. Just less than a mile from the trailhead you'll start to encounter some of the larger and older trees in the stand.

The yellow cedar is easily recognizable by its incredible shaggy gray bark. Another identifier is the long, droopy, scale-like needle. During the last ice age yellow cedar were as common as Douglas fir. Today they occupy wet and cold sites typically around 5,000 feet in elevation. The weary looking branches help them shed snow easily, helping this super-slow growing species out-compete other trees in marginal habitat.

In about a mile the trail breaks out of the forest and winds around the base of a giant natural amphitheater covered in a rich carpet of false hellebore. When the trail re-enters the forest, you'll encounter the biggest and oldest yellow cedars yet. The serious tree aficionados will probably want to hike the trail twice.

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